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Exciting Moments in Audience Research – Past, Present and Future

Sonia Livingstone

Introduction

To understand the commonalities and diversity in the contributions to this volume, this final chapter traces two interlocking histories. Hall's (1980) 'exciting moment' in audience research gave birth to reception studies and, as part of the advent of British cultural studies, much intellectual energy has been expended in debating the unfolding narrative of audience research. At the same time, society is witnessing more and more transformations in the now digital, convergent, networked landscape, resulting in more diverse modes of audiencing and a fascination with the narrative of audiences. Audiences no longer are predictable; they no longer inhabit only the living room sofa. Instead, they are everywhere and nowhere, which is demanding that audience researchers follow the latest trends in order to be where the action is. This chapter argues that these two narratives are converging in the phenomenon of participation, arguably one of the key social uses of media (as addressed by this volume more broadly), with more or less *participatory audiences* displacing the 'active audience' as a consequence of the onward march of mediatization processes. Participation in society increasingly means participation in and through the uses of media, while, in a parallel shift, the complex media landscape offers increasing, though heavily qualified and contingent, opportunities for participation.

'A new and exciting phase in so-called audience research ... may be opening up'

(Hall 1980: 131).

Fifteen years ago, following a careful look at our field, two sociologists offered a doubly articulated account that attracted considerable attention (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998). First, they told the story of changing audiences, from the *simple*, physically co-located yet carefully managed theatre and concert hall audiences and the *mass* audiences of first print media and then broadcasting, to the *diffused* audience in the modern complex and globalized media landscape. This history can be deepened by drawing on the work of others. It constitutes a kind of fusion of Butch's (2000) fascinating account of the perennially contested nature of active versus passive audiences across the centuries and Thompson's (1995) sociological analysis of the shift in modernity from *interpersonal* through *mass* to *quasi-mediated* communication. Noting that the phases (simple, mass, diffused) are conceived as cumulative rather than substitutive (e.g. today we have live comedy club, prime time comedy shows and peer exchange of comic clips on YouTube), Abercrombie and Longhurst's sketch provided a promising starting point, which has been taken forward in various ways by the rich and diverse contributions to this volume.

Abercrombie and Longhurst's second account attracted more attention in audience studies. Overlaying their history of how audiences have changed, they articulated a

history of how audience research throughout the twentieth century can be periodized. They identified the initially dominant *behavioural paradigm* of media effects and uses and gratifications research, moving through what they called the *incorporation-resistance paradigm* of British cultural studies to their own assessment of contemporary research, which they described as the *spectacle-performance paradigm* of late or even post-modern society. This history has also been told by many others. For some, the driving force was a fruitful if sometimes conflicting diversification from few to many intellectual traditions (Jensen and Rosengren 1990); others emphasize how audience research has served as a fertile bridging point between divergent perspectives (Livingstone 1998). For Curran (1990), there was no significant increase in understanding; active audience studies offered merely a revision of what was already known but often overlooked. Most often, however, the story of audience research is retold as having been pivotally transformed by the then-exciting merger of ideology critique, reception-aesthetics and ethnographic work developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Alasuutari 1999; Nightingale 1996; see also Meers and Biltereyst, and Schröder, this volume); although other canonical texts than Hall's (1980) 'Encoding/Decoding' paper, originally written and distributed in 1973, have also attracted attention (Katz, Peters, Liebes and Orloff 2003).

Similar to other phases of audiencehood, these patterns of audience research have proved cumulative rather than substitutive. Specifically, the behavioural approach has survived its many critics (notably Barker and Petley 2001; Rowland 1983; see Ruddock's updating of Gerbner's cultivation theory in this volume, along with Soto-Sanfiel's

application of uses and gratifications theory to the playing of first person shooter games). Similarly, the influence of reception and cultural studies remains strong (see several of the chapters in this volume), continuing to stand alongside the insights of the spectacle-performance paradigm and postmodern accounts of a culture of narcissism on which it draws. The result is multiple theories and concepts, although hope for a single, consensual theory of audiences persists (Michelle 2007).

Transforming Societies, Transforming Audiences

When national media predominated over transnational forms (Scannell 1988), when social hierarchies were more salient than the horizontal flows of people or ideas (Appadurai 1996), and when generic forms (news, soap opera, documentary) were only beginning to be challenged by emerging hybrid forms, for many in our field, it seems that the theory, methods and politics of audience research were more absorbing than investigating changing audiences. During Hall's exciting period in audience research, reflexive self examination and internal debate dominated conferences and journals (Barker and Beezer 1992; Livingstone 1998; Morley 1981), while the empirical effort to show how audiences variously responded to yet another text or genre was 'business as usual'. However, while researchers were debating their internal differences, audiences were changing.

Audiences no longer sit in family groups, enjoying leisure time in their living rooms, and being available for broadcasters or researchers (Livingstone 2009a). The

longstanding and formative fascination with mass audiences absorbed in national broadcast television (Scannell 1988), viewed on family television sets (Morley 1986) in domestic living rooms, with audiences that were lively (Palmer 1986) or conflictual (Ang 1996), was, it seems, historically (and culturally) contingent. So too were the associated assumptions about neatly scheduled lifestyles, parental regulation of children's viewing and the reproduction of gendered power relations through viewing practices. Much of this is consigned to history. The questions now are where are audiences to be found, what are they now part of, and why does this matter?

In retrospect, it may seem curious that developments in the nature of media *qua* objects or technologies, for example, the advent of satellite and multichannel broadcasting, video recording and electronic games machines, initially attracted such little interest from researchers absorbed by probing the semiotic play among audiences of media *qua* texts (Livingstone 2007). Similarly, work on the social uses of computers and telephones seemed to be the preserve of a parallel world unrelated to the all-absorbing focus of (mainly) television studies on the interdependencies of mass media and mass society (e.g. Alasuutari 1999; Curran and Gurevitch 1991; Nightingale 1996). Works on audiences published in the 1980s and 1990s often refer only to television, with other social uses of media marginalized with what, in hindsight, is an extraordinary blindness to the convergent media landscape around the corner.

What broke the mold? Most obviously, changes in the media landscape eventually forced themselves onto the academic agenda. Also, experienced much more as a threat

than an opportunity, scholars in other fields (information systems, education, political science, sociology, anthropology and more) became interested in the social shaping and social consequences of technologies – in ways that seemed sometimes to trample on or, more positively, to intersect with the traditional domain of audience research. Different kinds of projects sprang up, motivated by the excitement of bridging interdisciplinary domains in new and creative ways rather than carving out a new, more finely distinguished paradigm. I recall, in particular, the excitement at the 1990 International Communication Association conference in Dublin, over the Brunel project on Household Uses of Information and Communication Technologies (Silverstone, Morley, Dahlberg and Livingstone 1989). This fused semiotics and consumption studies, located audience members in real families and encompassed all media goods, not just television, but also the home computer, the telephone, magazines and music – wherever they were engaged – in the living room, but also in the bedroom, the kitchen, cars or in the street (see Peil and Röser, this volume).

As media changed, new questions were being asked about changing audiences. They included deceptively banal questions, such as how is television like the washing machine, as well as familiar but still taxing ones, such as whether everyday audience activities play a constitutive role in the changes. As Pavlíčková argues in this volume, renewed attention was paid to the related question of whether agency belonged more to the technology (now more inclusively defined) or the user, notwithstanding that this often under-theorized concept tends to underestimate the power of social structure to determine individual user practices (Morley 1981; see also Dhoest, and Döveling and Sommer, this volume). As

audiencing becomes ever more embedded in the complex and diverse structures of modernity, understanding the social context extends out from the living room to embrace – in Habermas’s terms – all aspects of both the lifeworld and the system world, including the ways in which their interrelations increasingly are mediatized (Hepp 2011). Today, multimethod projects that embrace the ordinary person’s whole way of life (Radway 1988), have become common (e.g. Bakardjieva 2005; Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010; Hoover and Clark 2008; and argued by Dover in this volume), although the analysis of the social uses of media in all their diversity remains methodologically demanding.

‘The “audience” is everywhere and nowhere’ (Bird 2003: 3).

Also, the rethinking that digital networked communication demands is well underway, replacing separate attention to television, radio, computer or film audiences (Meers and Biltreyst, this volume) with audiences embedded variously in a complex media ecology (Ito et al. 2010), ‘mediaculture’ (Maigret and Macé 2005, cited in Bourdaa and Hong-Mercier, this volume) or ‘convergence culture’ (Jenkins, 2006), and engaging with particular ‘constellations of media’ (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010), cross-media (Schröder; Pavlíčková, this volume), or media convergence (across network, mass and interpersonal communication; Jensen 2009). In a similar vein, Evans (2011) argues that *transmedia* combines narrative, technology, mobility, space and engagement in new ways, enabling particular audience paths or trajectories. Relatedly, Hasebrink and Hölig (2011) examine communication modes emerging between mass and interpersonal

communication, arguing that the traditional focus on genres (and the contract of mutual expectations they establish with their readers or audiences) would be better reconceived as modes of communication, albeit still enabled by a co-evolved, human-technological interface.

How can we study everything, now that everything is mediated, and retain some coherence as audience researchers (Livingstone 2004)? This is especially demanding when it is not just the media landscape, however conceptualized, that is changing. Crucially, in a world where everything is mediated (Livingstone 2009b), the implications for audiences, as Thompson (1995) early identified, are bound up with fundamental changes in modernity. Observing the notable diversity in the approaches and topics explored in this volume might seem to question what we have been doing in the past few decades after escaping from the history/culture-blind agenda of the behavioural paradigm and overcoming the equally universalistic ‘spectator’ or ‘subject’ dominant in film, screen and literary studies (see Meers and Biltreyst in this volume). What was so all absorbing in television studies that we recognized other important technological changes only rather late in the day?

Have we, as sometimes suggested by outsiders looking in, merely been chasing the latest fads and fashions in the changing media – perhaps in an effort not to be wrong-footed again by technological developments? When audience research broke away from adherence to the encoding/decoding (or incorporation/resistance) model, with its emphasis on Corner’s (1991) ‘public knowledge’ rather than ‘popular culture’ project,

there was an initial boom in studies of soap operas in the 1980s, which inverted established value systems that denigrated housewife viewers (Geraghty 1990). This was followed quickly by studies of talk shows, which brought a new recognition that audiences talk meaningfully, not only in front of the screen, but also sometimes on the screen (Carpignano, Andersen, Aronowitz and Difazio 1990; Livingstone and Lunt 1994). Attention then turned to the new phenomenon of reality television (Hill 2002), which seemingly ridiculed – and certainly demanded a rethinking of – our carefully built advocacy of audiences as serious players in the cultural public sphere. As genres multiplied and hybridized faster than we could investigate the emerging contract of mutual expectations that underpinned audience researchers’ analysis of more established genres, the kaleidoscope was given another shake and suddenly, it seemed, the audience was dead (Jermyn and Holmes 2006).

The simultaneous diversification and convergence of many media technologies, television being just one, was suddenly made evident. Katz and Scannell (2009) proposed that this, in fact, meant the end of television and, therefore, the (television) audience. For others, once media technologies enabled audiences to talk back, and to talk to each other in public, this transformed them into ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen 2006; see also Gillmor 2004; for a critique, see Ridell, this volume). Both media genres and social spheres were regarded as being so hybridized as to produce new kinds of individuals – the *produser* (Bruns 2008), the *citizen-consumer* (Murdock 1992; see also Schrøder, this volume) or, more prosaically, the *user* – which were replacing audiences. The last term of ‘user’ is especially problematic, though the particular semantic infelicity

of applying the term ‘audience’ to computer-based media has produced an inexorable rise in its popularity (e.g. Peil and Röser, this volume; see also Bakardjieva 2005). But ‘user’ lacks any necessary relation to the processes of *communication* and also it is difficult to conceive of users collectively (compare, audience, public), both of which are defining features of audiences (Livingstone 2005).

However, it would be wrong to conclude that while audience research may have chased the latest fashion in the television industry, it has missed the bigger picture – the fundamental shift from mass to networked media, which, supposedly, has killed off the audience. In fact, the opposite is true: audience researchers, in this flurry of activity, have been making sure that they are in the right place at the right time; they have been putting themselves ‘where the action is’ regarding the changing conditions of communication. For it is the conditions of communication that shape the conditions for what really fascinates many audience researchers, which is not so much media, technologies or texts, as identities and social relations, the practices that engender common understandings and sources of difference, and the determinants of acquiescence, collusion with or resistance to power (Silverstone 2002).

Tracking the Changing Conditions of Communication

It is pertinent, then, rather than a mere historical peculiarity that Goffman’s master’s thesis was on housewives’ responses to the radio soap opera (Manning 2005). In the same way, several decades earlier, it was indicative rather than exceptional in the history of

audience research, that on the day after H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* was broadcast, Cantril's (1940) research team was in the streets of America to gather the varieties of audience response to the apparently cataclysmic end of the world. This tradition of 'just in time' research has persisted, evidenced by the tracking of immediate global reception to the release of the third part of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Barker and Mathijs 2008). In the 1980s, when the world was asking 'Who shot J.R.?', surely it was admirable not faddish that audience researchers dropped everything to enquire, in all seriousness, why the world cared about the answer to this question (Ang 1985; Liebes and Katz 1990; see also Dayan and Katz (1992) on other heavily mediated moments which, however briefly, stopped the world in its tracks – a political summit, a royal wedding, the death of a celebrity, a natural disaster).

These, and many other instances spanning mass and networked media, have enabled a subtle rearrangement of people and media, adjusting the possibilities for identity, relationships, commonality and resistance. For this reason, and rightly they have attracted the attention of audience researchers because they capture the changes afoot in the conditions of 'audiencing', to use Fiske's (1994) term. Even nearly 20 years ago, Fiske was urging us not to reify the audience as a thing distinct from other things such as publics, markets or families (Livingstone 2005), but rather to consider audiencing. The verb demands analysis of the contextualized *processes* whereby people and media become mutually defining in a dynamic intertwining of agency and structure, which Giddens (1984) termed 'structuration'. Ridell (this volume) describes it as, 'people act as an audience every time they assume the position in which they receive and interpret a

cultural performance or media representation'. This definition encompasses both mass and networked media, raising (rather than foreclosing) the key question of what roles or modes of participation are afforded to people by the particular cultural performance or media representation with which they engage? People *qua* audiences not only take up multiple roles in relation to (usually) screen media (whether in front of the screen, on it, creating for it or re-using its contents elsewhere), they also explore and invent new ways of connecting with each other, through and around screen media.

In this sense, analysis of the rearrangements among people afforded by the mediation of mobile phones or social networking or blogging is a continuation of rather than a radical break from earlier analyses of the rearrangements among people afforded by soap operas, talk shows or reality television. So, it is a continual process of reshaping the communicative possibilities for ordinary people that links, say, the astonishing first series of *Big Brother* (Hill 2002), the curiously unexpected adoption by youth of short text messaging (SMS) (Ling and Haddon 2008), the moment when personal stereos enabled private music listening in public (Bull 2000), the under-the-radar explosion in fanzines, remixed music and other forms of user-generated content (Jenkins 2006), and the apparent 'take over' of private communication by one company, Facebook (boyd and Hargittai 2010). Capturing moments of change before they become past – in this case, all these assorted instances of shifting interrelations and remediated modes of participation or disconnection – is vital if we are to understand the present.

Frameworks of Participation

How should we analyze these changing conditions for communication, these shifting arrangements of practices, technologies and institutions that enable people to act in relation to each other in particular ways? One theme emerges strongly from many of the chapters in this volume, that of the move from active audiences (characteristic of late 20th century research) to participatory audiences in the twenty-first century. While avoiding the common, but mistaken claim that audiences of networked media are more *active* than audiences of mass media (Livingstone 2010), several chapters in this volume (e.g. Schrøder) pursue the idea that these audiences are more *participatory*. It is not so much that people have changed, but more that the mediated ‘opportunity structures’ (Cammaerts, in press) or, as Spitulnik (2010) calls them, the ‘participant structures’, in certain respects, have become more open and enabling of participation. In short, the nature of mediation changes as mediatization advances. Renewed interest in participation is changing the research focus because – as in the case of Abercrombie and Longhurst’s spectator/performance paradigm (though not, I would suggest, their two previous paradigms) – it is motivated by recognition of an underlying change in the conditions of audiencehood. Indeed, the focus on participation appears to be taking precedence over earlier fascination with spectatorship in a narcissistic culture, demonstrated by the close examination in several of the foregoing chapters of the motivations for and the modes and consequences of mediated participation.

A complex media ecology requires careful analysis of the specific conditions for communication. Interestingly, several contributors to this volume propose new terms to

conceptualize the interlinking of people and media in context. Pavlíčková draws on hermeneutic theory to reveal the *protocols* for the social uses of media, these being conventionalized practices anchored in cultural and value-laden horizons of expectations. Ruddock opens up the communication *event* to reveal the social and material coding of relationships being constituted in and through such an event (see also Giles's account of parasocial relationships). Ridell refers to *modes of action* and Nyre and O'Neill examine the dialogic, social and ethical parameters of *mediated situations* to understand varying levels of individual media uses. However, these situations or protocols are not well understood, and it is noteworthy that for researchers of new media contexts considerable effort is required to explain the particular conditions, relations and conventions they are concerned with (for examples in this volume, see Bourdaa and Hong-Mercier on a fan forum, and Soto-Sanfiel on an electronic game), before the possibilities for audience participation can be grasped.

In a parallel effort, initially to understand the significance of audience participation programmes (Livingstone and Lunt 1994; Livingstone and Lunt, in press), I found Goffman's (1981) analysis of the participation framework helpful. Goffman unpacks the fundamental dualism – between speaker and hearer – on which subsequent dualisms (text and reader, encoder and decoder, affordances and user; Livingstone and Das, in press) rely. Goffman argues that the folk category of speaker can be decomposed into *author* (of the message), *animator* (of the sounds and images) and *principal* (the social identity constituted through the communication). The hearer, meanwhile, may be listening or not, *ratified* (sanctioned by social norms) participant or not, bystander or overhearer. For

example, in talk shows the expert animates ('research shows that...') authoritative knowledge of science (the principal), but is revealed as inauthentic since he or she is not the 'author' of that knowledge. By contrast, the ordinary person ('in my experience...') better fits the expectations of the folk category of speaker (with author and animator aligned) and so is received empathetically – though he or she can only establish the ordinary person as principal, and this is easily disregarded by the often skeptical overhearers (the viewers).

Reality television goes a step further since participants both represent and generate their personal experience, then and there, during the show (via a competition, a challenge, a group task), making the home audience witness to the studio audience's struggle to sustain a credible identity. As Hill (2002) observes, the fascination of this form of audiencing lies in detecting who is participating and on what terms, and deserving of what judgements of trust and authenticity, involving the home audience shifting constantly between ratified observer (of the intended action) to unrated observer of the telling 'slip' that makes sense of all the rest. Using and extending Goffman's wider repertoire of concepts, researchers of new media audiences and users in private, public and semi-public places can throw light on emerging modes of communication in the new media landscape (reviewed in Livingstone and Lunt, in press). Consider the way that Facebook, for example, builds circles of semi-ratified participants ('friends') who contribute or overhear with impunity, while privacy settings allow people control over the social roles ('family members', 'friends of friends') that enable belonging to the participation framework.

While participation frameworks are as numerous as the situations in which people communicate, these, in turn, can be categorized according to the emergent conventions that typify certain common situations. For Gershon (2010), Spitulnik (2010) and other media ethnographers, the participation framework can be encompassed at a higher order level by the notion of media ideologies, which ‘focus on how people understand both the communicative possibilities and the material limitations of a specific channel’ (Gershon 2010: 284) and, in turn, ‘will shape, although not determine, their communicative practices’ (Gershon 2010: 285). While the notion of communication ideology usefully focuses analysis on questions of power, the alternative notion of participatory genres focuses analysis on the interlocking of structural affordances (on the part of social or civic structures) and lived understandings (on the part of people, the audiences who engage with these structures).

Applying the notion of ‘genre’ to conventionalized practices of participation may seem infelicitous, but it is useful for continuing the tradition in reception studies of conceptualizing genre not as a property of the text *per se*, but rather as emerging from the conventionalized or contractual interaction between text and audience. Thus, it concerns, as Livingstone and Das (in press) argue in relation to this and other core concepts in audience research, the *interface* between audience and text, user and technology, agency and structure. In this vein, Dufrasne and Patriarche (in press) examine how stakeholders’ conceptions of participatory genres, enacted by creating or closing down particular organizational structures for citizen engagement, shape public policy making. Ito et al.

(2010) take a more bottom up approach, revealing the participation genres by which youth organizes its life-stages and lifestyle-specific modes of communication and participation (e.g. the genres of ‘hanging out’, ‘messaging around’, and ‘geeking out’). The terms *participant structures*, or *opportunity structures*, or *participatory genres* (the last being the only one that encompasses both audience agency and structural affordances) invite audience researchers to move beyond the binaries of speaker/hearer, encoder/decoder or user/technology, and to identify the genres of participation (i.e. the types of participation frameworks emerging from people’s engagement with diverse media) that are significant in the unfolding media landscape. This may enable development of a *paradigm of participation*, which would appear increasingly important for both audiences and audience research.

Taking the Longer View

As will be apparent, I am proposing that we recognize participation as a fourth paradigm, extending Abercrombie and Longhurst’s original sequence of three. It recognizes continuities with previous concern over performance, while displacing (or at least supplementing) earlier fascination with self by renewed normative commitment (again, from both audiences and audience research) to participation in the wider world (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010; Nyre 2009). It would seem that audience researchers want to understand how media enable or impede the possibilities for audiences *qua* mediated publics to participate in society (Carpentier 2009; Dahlgren 2009), which concern is apparently overtaking earlier concerns first with resistance and

then with identities, and supplementing longstanding interest in interpretation by growing interest in media practices (Drotner 2008; Spitulnik 2010). More importantly, audiences often are keen to engage with media as a means of connecting with (though sometimes disconnecting from) the wider public realm (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010).

Standing back from the particularities of shifting modes of participation, the question then becomes participation in what (Livingstone 2011)? Is the goal (as advocated by audience researchers or as understood by audiences) to participate in media *per se* or to participate in society through media? While much previous research on this point is unclear, it seems (conveniently) that in an increasingly mediatized society, these goals are converging. To participate in media increasingly means participating in society, with media no longer sequestered in the disconnected domain of private leisure, as Schröder insightfully points out in his chapter on mediated citizenship. Moreover, participation requires the structured activities of a collectivity: one cannot participate alone. Here the notion of *participation* improves on the sometimes decontextualized notions of *activity* in earlier audience reception studies, and on the sometimes (though not necessarily) individualized notions of *use* and *user* in new media research.

Colombo and Vittadini (2011) propose that audience research should – and often does – recognize the contingent interrelations among three forms of social collectivities, each partially or wholly constituted through the interpretative practices of audience engagement with social structures. They point first, to audiences (understood in terms of identity, interpretative repertoires, and imagined community, oriented towards common

or distinctive cultural products); second, to publics (understood in terms of practices of consumption, reflection and participation, oriented towards common goals); and third, to social groups or networks (understood in terms of relationships and belonging, social and civic uses, oriented towards community). In some sense, we can consider audiences, publics and networks as reflecting more abstract genres of participation, each specifying a somewhat different 'contract' between (media/social/civic) structures and (ordinary people's) agency in the lifeworld.

As media, political and social landscapes change, audiences become more pervasive (diffusing and extending, with 'audiencing' everywhere), creating and rematerializing cultural products, re-locating their practices in new network paths, enabling reflexive, self-generated publics. Colombo and Vittadini (2011) go on to argue that the first collectivity positions people in relation to cultural performances and media products, the second in relation to civic and democratic (or antidemocratic) structures and institutions, and the third in relation to the communities (of work, locale, ethnicity and heritage) in which they live. Historically, audience research has devoted most attention to the first of these, examining the importance to audiencing of the power of re-presentation, the contribution of interpretation and practice to the circuit of culture and political economy, and the fluctuating trends in acquiescence to appropriation of or resistance to the inexorable rise in commercialized communications. But, increasingly, we are interested in the contribution of audiences to understanding other civic and social collectivities, with the emphasis on participation in these wider domains rather than (just) to participation in media.

Earlier in this chapter, I considered the shifts in particular participation frameworks, and the wider genres of participation that mark the exciting moments of recent decades. However, viewed over a longer time scale, this period can be characterized in terms of a single paradigmatic shift (from mass broadcasting to networked communication), shaped by more fundamental changes in modernity, which Krotz (2007) identifies as *globalization, mediatization, commercialization and individualization*. This shift may be positioned within the longer periodization of audience history with which I began this chapter, in order to understand how changing communication infrastructures connect media forms (texts, artifacts, devices) with the activities and practices through which people communicate, and the social arrangements by which they are organized and institutionalized (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006).

If we take a longer view, we can recognize that the domestic family television audience of the 1950s and 1960s was a rather particular and, in key ways, limited model of the wider cultural and historical phenomenon of audiencing; so too did the associated model of encoding and decoding prove a rather limited (though still valuable) guide to analyzing audiencing. For a wider conceptual repertoire, we need to look further back to the history of forms of communication and participation, to oral cultures, writing and the emergence of print. From this perspective, Livingstone and Das (in press) distinguish oral communication cultures (multimodal, situated, co-located communication with low literacy requirements), print cultures (monomodal, linear, dispersed communication requiring high literacy), broadcast cultures (audio/visual, linear mass communication

requiring low literacy) and networked cultures (multimodal hypertextual niche/mass communication placing high literacy requirements on its users).

Conclusion

Audiences are dead yet audiences are everywhere. Audiences are global yet audiences are ever more niche. Audiences are consumers of ever more media and yet – in a manner almost without precedent – they are also creators of content. Audiences have become irrevocably plural, notwithstanding marketers’ efforts to homogenize and commodify ‘the audience’ (Ang 1991). The media landscape is more globalized, although national framing persists especially for broadcasting and print. This landscape is increasingly diversified, with both homogeneity and fragmentation in audience response occasioning critical concern. It offers ever more participatory opportunities, yet sustained public engagement is ever more in doubt. And it is more convergent, rendering the very notion of ‘audience’ or ‘user’ problematic. In trying to make sense of their object of study, audience researchers may seem always to be chasing the latest fad. But, I argue that a better interpretation is that they are tracking audiencing as a shifting practice embedded in specific historical, cultural and technological contexts.

This interpretation led me to reconsider what audience researchers find interesting. How do they identify the moments when audiences participate in the reshaping of time/space/sociality? Two answers seem feasible. First, influenced by British cultural studies, feminist studies and media anthropology, audience researchers have sought to

bring into view the phenomena that tend to be unnoticed, ignored or repressed by established institutions – examples include housewives reading romance novels or watching soap operas (Geraghty 1990), the spread of diasporic media under the national radar (Georgiou 2006), young people’s transgressive sexual practices online or their quiet rejection (easily mistaken for apathy) of the generic address of ‘news’ (Spitulnik 2010); see also Dover’s analysis (this volume) of the ‘identities-in-interaction’ mobilized through media-related chat during lessons in a British secondary school, and Peil and Röser’s account (this volume) of how Internet use is associated with greater gender equality at home than the desk top computer that preceded it.

This approach typically motivates critique of the participant (or opportunity) structures that allow or often prevent people from participating fairly, critically and creatively in the media landscape in which their lives increasingly are embedded. Second, and especially recently, audience researchers have produced critically examinations of whatever was current, whatever was being heralded as new – whether the arrival of the iPhone, establishment of Al Jazeera, the multimedia phenomenon of Harry Potter, ‘everyone’ watching X-Factor – because mass change enrolls mass participation and is often mobilized by public controversy. Consider the frequent focus of audience research on moral panics: where there’s the smoke of popular anxiety, there may really be a fire. In both cases, what is at stake are the opportunities to participate through diverse modes of mediated communication, whether they work to reproduce or to change existing power structures.

To mobilize our collective resources for tracking and critiquing these fast-evolving forms of audiencing within the evolving participatory paradigm, it seems that audience researchers are setting aside once-fraught clashes between theory, epistemology and political standpoints, and following the path of more peaceful efforts of bridge-building, eclecticism in methods, and hybridization or convergence of theory that parallels our topic of investigation (the convergent media landscape). This is not to imply that all has been resolved. Abercrombie and Longhurst's concepts of spectacle and performance admirably capture today's apparently narcissistic audience experiences centered on media events. But whether, for example, phenomena such as reality television or celebrity fandom wholly replace the workings of ideology, resistance or media effects remains controversial. Debates over developments in audience research will continue and may produce new ideas. But clearly, many audience researchers' interest is in analyzing developments in audiences, their object of study, which itself is transforming.

In this chapter, I have argued that audience research must be multidisciplinary, acting fast to capture insights and findings as they spring up. At the same time, it must be open-minded in scope and integrative in focus. And, last, it must pursue the dual analysis of, on the one hand, ordinary people's social uses of and, especially, their participation in media and, on the other hand, the mediation of social and civic participation more widely. While audience researchers work out their next steps, the frameworks for participation are themselves shifting and diversifying as digitally convergent and networked media become ever more tightly embedded in diverse spheres of life, resulting in new modes of audiencing. As the participant structures afforded to audiences *qua* publics, citizens and

consumers, and the genres of participation that result, recalibrate the arrangements among people, media and social institutions, we must pay ever-closer attention to the changing conditions of communication in everyday life.

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